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SUBJECT: MEDIA CLAIMS OF US SUPPORT FOR PKK COMPLICATE
MISSION EFFORT IN TURKEY

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

MEDIA SLAMS U.S. ON PKK ISSUE

1. (SBU) The PKK issue, and the perceived lack of action by the United States against PKK terrorists in northern Iraq, has become a chronic, negative story in Turkish media reporting on the U.S. and U.S.-Turkish relations. The story contributes to widespread negative perceptions of the United States and the U.S. effort in Iraq, and makes it more difficult for the mission to highlight positive developments in the U.S.-Turkish relationship through the Turkish media. The following are some of the most recent examples of negative coverage that illustrate how the PKK issue is complicating our relationship with Turkey and our public diplomacy efforts.

AMCONSUL ADANA ACCUSED OF SUPPORTING PKK

2. (U) Columns in two leading dailies, the staunchly secular "Milliyet" and "Cumhuriyet," on August 14 accused Amconsul Adana of supporting the PKK by visiting Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir. Baydemir had come under heavy fire in the Turkish media in recent days for visiting the family of a PKK militant who was allegedly involved in the killing of a security guard and was later killed in a shootout with Turkish police. "Milliyet" columnist Melih Asik wrote that "the goal of Adana Second Consul Alison's visit to Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir was to express support for the mayor, who had expressed his condolences to the family of a PKK militant." "America is now playing its game openly," he continued. "While protecting the PKK on Kandil Mountain and facilitating the terrorists' operations in Turkey, now it has taken the organization under its wing in this country," he concluded.

3. (U) Columnist Ali Sirmen made a similar argument the same day in "Cumhuriyet." Sirmen wrote that the Adana Consul justified her visit to Baydemir "to pass on condolences for the killing of a security guard and wounding of two policemen by the PKK/Kongra-Gel." (NOTE: this claim is factually incorrect. Amconsul Adana's visit to Baydemir was carefully considered and intended to convey a message to Baydemir on the need to maintain a clear distance from the PKK and to condemn PKK terrorism. END NOTE.) "But Baydemir's office isn't the right place to pass on such condolences," Sirmen argued. "In fact, the Consul was using Baydemir as a vehicle for passing condolences to the family of the PKK terrorist," he continued. "The United States is supporting Kurdish independence in Iraq and, despite its many promises to Turkey, has failed to take any initiative against the PKK," Sirmen concluded.

U.S. "DOUBLE STANDARD" ON TERRORISM

4. (U) On the same day, a front-page story in "Cumhuriyet" titled "U.S. Embassy Double Standard on the PKK" criticized the embassy for sending a warning message to U.S. citizens on possible PKK attacks on August 15, anniversary date of the organization's first violent actions, "while the U.S. has failed to take a single action against 5,000 PKK militants in northern Iraq." "Cumhuriyet" argues that the PKK has been "emboldened" by U.S. inaction. The paper then notes that after Ambassador Edelman told reporters several months ago that "the U.S. will not take military action against PKK terrorists," the PKK announced that it would end its cease-fire and resume its attacks in Turkey. (NOTE: In fact, the quote is incorrect, and the link with the end of the PKK cease-fire is misleading. The Ambassador actually said that a U.S. military action "should not be expected in the near future." The PKK had been saying for months before the Ambassador made that comment that it would end its "cease-fire" on June 1. END NOTE.)

AMERICA'S PKK!

15. (U) The following day, "Sabah," one of Turkey's largest-circulation dailies, carried an extensive front-page story on the PKK under the headline "America's PKK!" The article reports on the activities of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's brother Osman, who has reportedly broken away from the PKK in northern Iraq and established a new political party. Based on statements allegedly made by Abdullah Ocalan through his Turkish lawyers, "Sabah" implies that the U.S. is sheltering and supporting Osman Ocalan, and that U.S. officials may have passed "a sack of money" to Osman in exchange for his cooperation. As further "evidence" of the bargain the U.S. has allegedly reached with Osman Ocalan, the paper cites a declaration by Osman's new party (the Patriotic Democratic Party) claiming to support the U.S. occupation in Iraq and calling on Kurds to cooperate with the United States. The article concludes with Abdullah Ocalan criticizing his brother for "selling out the Kurds and the Middle East for a bowl of soup from the United States." "The U.S. nurtured Saddam for a time as well, then attacked him," Abdullah Ocalan reportedly said, warning that "the same thing could happen to Osman."

EMBASSY FIGHTS BACK, BUT THE STORY CONTINUES

16. (U) Embassy Ankara issued a press release on August 16 in an effort to counter the speculation and misinformation generated by the PKK story over the weekend. The embassy statement noted that our Adana Consul had given a consistent, uncompromising message against the PKK and PKK terrorism to all of her interlocutors in Diyarbakir last week. It also noted that Turkey has had no better friend than the United States in its effort to combat PKK terrorism over the past 20 years. The assumption that the U.S. is supporting the PKK or a PKK faction, however, has become accepted as conventional wisdom in the Turkish media. A "Milliyet" report on August 18 repeats claims made by "Sabah" over the weekend that Osman Ocalan is under U.S. control and is being used by the U.S. to counter hard-line PKK elements. (COMMENT: Ironically, some Turkish commentators have actually welcomed U.S. "support" for Osman Ocalan and interpreted this "support" as part of a carefully conceived U.S. strategy to fulfill its commitment to Turkey to eliminate the PKK threat. END COMMENT.)

COMMENT

17. (SBU) The press ferment on the PKK reported here is just a snapshot taken from the long-running Turkish media serial on the alleged relationship between the U.S. and the PKK. Of course, many of the Turkish press claims are based on false information, innuendo, and flawed analysis. But the problems they create for our relationship with Turkey, and particularly our public diplomacy efforts, are real. The stories will undoubtedly continue until we can change the perception that the U.S. is unable or unwilling to fulfill its commitment to eliminate the PKK threat in Iraq.

EDELMAN